

**TESTIMONY OF MARK WEITZMAN**

**DIRECTOR OF THE TASK FORCE AGAINST HATE AND TERRORISM**

**SIMON WIESENTHAL CENTER**

**BEFORE THE**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**Hearing on**

**"USING THE WEB AS A WEAPON:**

**THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR**

**VIOLENT RADICALIZATION AND**

**HOMEGROWN TERRORISM"**

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**WASHINGTON, DC**

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Good Afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for inviting me to speak to you today on the topic of "Using the Web as a Weapon: the Internet as a Tool for Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism." My name is Mark Weitzman, and I am the Director of the Task Force Against Hate and Terrorism for the Simon Wiesenthal Center. I am also the Simon Wiesenthal Center's chief representative to the United Nations.

While I often begin my presentations by saying that we at the Simon Wiesenthal Center have been tracking extremism online since 1995, the reality is that we actually began much earlier. By 1983 and 1984, various domestic extremists such as George Dietz, Tom Metzger and Louis Beam were already using the Bulletin Board Systems to post material for their followers and others.<sup>1</sup> The potential that these earliest users saw was later realized, leading one United States white supremacist to declare a decade later that "the Internet is our sword."<sup>2</sup>

Some, like David Duke, saw the Internet as not only being a revolutionary communications medium, but as having great import for their own revolutionary ideas. For example, Duke wrote on his website, "I believe that the Internet will begin a chain reaction of racial enlightenment that will shake the world by the speed of its intellectual conquest."<sup>3</sup> Duke's longtime friend, Don Black, together with Duke's ex-wife (and Black's future wife), Chloe Hardin teamed up to begin Stormfront on March 27, 1995, which is generally credited as being the first extremist website, and which today is still one of the most prominent and important sites online.<sup>4</sup>

The Oklahoma City bombing brought domestic extremism into sharper focus, and the increasing use by the general public of the Internet quickly led more domestic extremists into the electronic age. At that time we began to publicly track that growth, and have continued to do so. The growth has been explosive, with our database growing from 1 (Stormfront) at the time of the bombing of the Alfred Murrah building on April 19, 1995, to over 7,000 today. Initially, the overwhelming number of those sites came from what could be described as Western extremists. These included skinhead, neo-Nazi, white

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.publiceye.org/hate/earlybbs.html>. Kenneth Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> See my article "The Internet is Our Sword: Aspects of Online Anti-Semitism," in John Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, Eds. *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Vol. I, pp. 911-925, Palgrave, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.stormfront.org/dblack/racist\\_021998.htm](http://www.stormfront.org/dblack/racist_021998.htm).

power, ethnic and religious extremist, homophobic and conspiratorial sites, and the numbers showed steady growth, as did the technical capabilities of the sites. They were used to recruit, to raise money, to propagandize, to incite, and to provide a virtual community to hitherto far-flung fellow believers. By doing so, the Internet came to be viewed as empowering a whole new generation of extremists.

The next defining moment was 9/11. The attacks on the United States signified a new stage in Internet extremism, with Islamist extremism rapidly exploding online. I use the term Islamist in contrast to Islam to signify the radical jihadist and extremist ideology. At the time of the attacks, there were almost no such sites. Today, they number in the thousands.

As might be expected, in some ways the use of the Internet by Islamist extremists resembled the early stages of Western extremist use, as they both began at a relatively simple level before moving on to more complex usage. However, from the very beginning, the Islamists who planned 9/11 were more sophisticated in their approach, using the Internet for planning and communication. Of course, part of that can be attributed to having the benefit of the growing technical capabilities of the Internet, as well as reflecting the growth in cyberknowledge of its users.

The reasons for this phenomenal growth are varied. The Internet is, as an early observer wrote “subversive, because [it] offer[s] potential enfranchisement to the disenfranchised and voice to the voiceless.”<sup>5</sup> It allows individuals who are isolated or alienated, both physically and psychologically, to feel that they are linked, empowered and members of an international movement. For some young Muslims in the West, who are living in an environment where they are alienated both from the majority culture and from the traditional structures of Muslim life that have broken down in the West, the Internet provides access to a radical form of Islam that gives seekers the virtual environment that they are searching for. This is seen as a purer and uncompromised version of the religion, and thus strengthens its appeal by creating a strong demarcation between the moderate version and its more extreme manifestation.

Radicalization can be a result of this relationship. The Internet, and its idealized and radicalized virtual community, overtakes the perceived dismal reality of the real world, and provides an authoritative narrative that creates its own reality. This reality is constructed to fill a void, and its prime target is youth, especially those alienated in some way from their surroundings. The use of professional, slick and appealing sites, videos, chat rooms, newsgroups, etc., are all forms of communication that are commonly used by younger users who are prepared to take the information they receive at face value.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Friedman, *Fuzzy Logic: Dispatches From the Information Revolution*, Montreal, Vehicule Press, 1998, pp. 82-83, cited in Weitzman, above.

This points out another important aspect of the Internet. As Ian Buruma has written, "The Internet...lacks a superego that filters out the monster from the depths."<sup>6</sup> This means that there is no editorial control, and anyone can present himself or herself as the expert, or the authoritative face of a religion. In this case, because of the social and psychological factors described above, Islam is presented as a pure and moral religion under continuous assault from the corrupt, immoral West, especially embodied by Israel and the United States. This narrative is illustrated online by references and visuals from areas of conflict, all carefully edited to fit into various aspects of the narrative (Islam as victim, Islam victorious, etc.).

This trend was summarized by an Arab Human Rights website that wrote, "Starting from a few years ago, observers have noticed a growing religious trend in Arabic web pages: The majority of Arabic language web pages are either about Islam, as interpreted by those responsible for the websites, or are calling for the spread of Islam.... The majority of Islamic web pages all call for the adoption of the extremist Sunni interpretation that has spread widely in the Arab Gulf area and extended to reach other Arab states, non-Arab Islamic states like Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Muslims living in Europe and North America.... In spite of the fact that many of these Islamic web pages preach religious hatred against non-Muslims and even against other Islamic groups, they have managed to slip past the bans and the filters put in place by Arab states. Many Arab governments practice selective censorship; that they permit the continued existence of these Islamic sites is less a result of a respect for the freedom of expression than it is a reflection of their satisfaction with the content of these websites."<sup>7</sup>

In many ways the Internet favors the religious extremist. It allows anyone to set himself or herself up as an authority figure, to the extent that reports last year indicate that some lesser-known Muslim leaders had overtaken Osama bin Laden as the leading figure in the jihadist movement.<sup>8</sup> They did this by using the chat rooms and online forums to establish their authority, and while some might react by saying that anything that cuts into the influence of bin Laden is good, the reality is that this means that even the removal of bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahri would have no impact in threatening the movement. And, since one of the effects of this online communication is that the more radical posters are the ones to stand out, and so the discourse is often ratcheted up, with the result being an even more militant or radicalized leadership and followers.

The growing sophistication of the Islamists is also apparent in the production values of their sites. Whether it is in the use of different media, such

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<sup>6</sup> Buruma, "China in Cyberspace," New York Review of Books, Nov. 4, 1999, p. 9, cited in Weitzman above.

<sup>7</sup> "The Internet in the Arab World: A New Space of Repression?" The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, <http://www.hrinfo.net/en/reports/net2004/all.shtml#14>. The report claims that there was a decrease in these sites after 9/11, an assertion that seems to be at odds with all other researchers' findings.

<sup>8</sup> "Qaeda Leaders Losing Sway Over Militants, Study Finds," New York Times, Nov. 15, 2006.

as videos and games, or different languages, the Islamist outreach is much more attractive and accessible. Part of this can be attributed to Arabic sites and organizations that have recognized the need to reach a large audience, but part of it is also the result of Western Muslim extremists, some of whom are converts, who have taken the familiarity they have acquired by living in the electronic society as well as taken advantage of the rights granted to them by those societies, to create and post Islamist and jihadist websites. By literally speaking the language of their targets, they represent a significant growing factor in online Islamist extremism.<sup>9</sup>

To illustrate the trends described above, we have put together a short PowerPoint demonstration. Without going into deep detail in these written remarks, I would like to offer some brief descriptions of the material that will be shown. The presentation begins with a look at how 9/11 is viewed in some eyes online, including those who applauded it as well as some conspiracies sites. The presence of the conspiracy site is significant, since so much of what passes as fact online is actually based on some form of conspiracy. These are often built around the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which allege Jewish control of the world, or around presenting the United States government as being engaged in various conspiracies or cover-ups, or ultimately having the entire Western world engaged in a vast, multi-layered conspiracy against the Islamic world.<sup>10</sup>

Next is a series of sites of media portals which show some of the varied methods that the Islamists use to get their message out, including some based on United States servers. These are followed by some looks at charts and other manuals on how to use violence, along with a novel interpretation of jihad that calls for an “electronic jihad.”

There are jihad discussion groups and some Islamist sites aimed at Latin America (a new target), as well as some links to extremist right-wing groups like Neo-Nazi, etc. It is worth pointing out that some observers have noted the attempts online to bring Islamist and right-wing extremist groups together, which are often visible in cyberspace.<sup>11</sup>

Next are a series of games that show some of the different themes used by all sorts of extremists, and how they target youth by tapping into fears and issues that the extremists attempt to manipulate. Finally, I end with a look at how the United States is still specifically threatened.

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<sup>9</sup> Home grown Web site funnels Islam’s extremist views to world, New York Times, Oct. 15, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> On the Protocols, see Steven L Jacobs and Mark Weitzman, *Dismantling the Big Lie*, Ktav, Hoboken, 2003, pp. 1-7.

<sup>11</sup> See George Michael, *The Enemy of My Enemy: The Alarming Convergence of Militant Islam and the Extreme Right*, University of Kansas Press, 2006, as well as my forthcoming article, “The Globalization of Anti-Semitism and Holocaust Denial,” which is scheduled to appear in the volume, *Lying About the Holocaust*, edited by Robert Wistrich.

## Conclusions

The Internet has become as real a battlefield as exists anywhere. It provides a haven and an opportunity for Islamist extremists to recruit, educate, communicate and bond in a secure, protected environment. As a result, in many ways it is the prime factor in the radicalization of many of recruits to the jihadi ideology. This factor calls for increased attention and efforts to counter the growing influence of the Internet in these areas. Some steps that might aid in this effort include:<sup>12</sup>

- 1) We must be aware of the empowering effect of the Internet on extremists.
- 2) We must have researchers and responders who have both the technical and linguistic skills to keep us informed, and to be able to respond to what is online.
- 3) We must make users aware of the misinformation and techniques used by extremists.
- 4) We must have increased cooperation internationally, and among the political, law enforcement, NGO, academic, and all other interested sectors.
- 5) There must be the political will to legally act when necessary.
- 6) We must be prepared to invest in positive sites that can present alternative narratives that might counteract the Islamists material (i.e., the Simon Wiesenthal Center's new AskMusa.com site that presents Jews and Judaism in four major Islamic languages directly to the Muslim public).

In many ways we have ceded the Internet to our enemies, and the result has been extremely harmful. However, even in a globalized world, there is no reason to believe that this condition is permanent. But we need to focus our efforts better, and to invest more resources in this struggle. As the famous Holocaust survivor, and namesake of our Center, Simon Wiesenthal wrote in 1989, "The combination of hatred and technology is the greatest threat facing mankind."<sup>13</sup> How we face that threat might well define the world we will live in the near future.

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<sup>12</sup> Most of the following proposals were presented in my remarks to the OSCE Expert Meeting on Best Practices in Combating Anti-Semitism, Berlin, Nov. 20-21, 2006, which can be found in the Conference Documentation, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Wiesenthal, *Justice Not Vengeance*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1989, p. 358.